

B. Sivakamasundari,

Ph. D. Research Scholar,

Department of English, Annamalai University,

Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu, India.

sivakamasundariibs@gmail.com

Dr. K. Muthuraman,

Professor of English, Dean,

Faculty of Fine Arts, Annamalai University,

Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu, India.

### Sterling A. Brown's "The Last Ride of Wild Bill": A Ballad of Black Heroism

Abstract: Sterling Allen Brown was a prominent African American poet. He regarded himself primarily as a teacher. Affectionately known as "Prof" by his students, Brown emerged as a gifted educator, directing and often acting in plays by Eugene O' Neill. Sterling A. Brown's final collection, *The Last Ride of Wild Bill and Eleven Narrative Poems*, was published in 1975. The present article aims to explore "The Last Ride of Wild Bill" as a traditional ballad-how Brown introduces his hero in a signature poem that describes the symbolic parameters and establishes Bill's heroic act. Brown achieves this task in terms of form, theme, action, and final metaphor.

Sterling A. Brown's final collection, *The Last Ride of Wild Bill and Eleven Narrative Poems*, was published in 1975 by one of the assertive exponents of Black Arts Movement,

Dudley Randell, who was interested in Southern Road that was unavailable to a new generation of readers. For Brown, the ballad form acquires a dramatic, protean, and differently musical medium for his multiple themes. Sanders perceives *The Last Ride of Wild Bill* as a collection of ballads that focus on the fundamental nature of heroism. Usually, in Brown's poems, the ballad form is often used to relate the heroic acts of Black men.

A ballad is a simple, straight-forward poem set to a tune. The primary characteristic of a ballad is that the story is told in a simple and direct manner. There is a quick succession of new scenes and incidents. The language is simple and concise. In a literary ballad, archaic words and spellings, common in medieval poetry, are used to create an authentic atmosphere. Repetition of phrases often occurs. There is a frequent use of alliteration. Normally, a four line stanza is used with the first and third line consisting of four feet and the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> line of three feet. The rhyme scheme is usually abcb.

The Traditional Ballad and the Literary Ballad are the two types of ballads. The traditional ballad which was popular in England and in Scotland in the 15<sup>th</sup> century was a specific form of narrative poem which has now become a part of the world of folk songs. The traditional ballad deals with episodes from well-known stories rendered impersonally. The literary ballad became popular at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and continued to be popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the emphasis of ballad shifted from narration to music as the prime constituent. It was set to a tune. Since the 1950s, there has been a revival of interest in traditional songs, sung by expert performers.

Stylistically, ballads and blues are more dynamic and open than closed poetic forms such as the Petrarchan sonnet. Traditionally, written in syllogistic form and offering the poet discursive possibilities, ballads and blues are primarily performative. The traditional ballad is

a communal art form that originates in rhythmic group action. The balladist is thus an inextricable part of his folk community.

The ballad, historically, has always been a vehicle by which the folk masses could realize a measure of poetic understanding in an unjust world. The complexity of Brown's artistic vision is nowhere better illustrated than in his choice of poetic forms. Trained at Williams College and Harvard in traditional English and Anglo-American literature, he wrote his poetry full of ballads and blues poems. His choice of ballads and blues as poetic forms is reflective of his need to invoke continuities between the past and the present. This poetry of paradox is nowhere better illustrated than in Brown's literary ballads. In them, Brown has freely adopted the traditional features of black folk ballad. Brown's literary ballads reinforce his achievement and importance within the black American literary tradition. His ballads successfully bridge the gap between rural and urban representations of black Americans and underscore the essential continuities between these representations.

In Brown's ambitious ballad, "The Last Ride of Wild Bill," he presents the accomplishments of a totally evolved contest hero who is reminiscent of Long Gone, Lost John, who is all but inviolable in avoiding the authorities. Brown skilfully tells stories of men who, each in their way, confront injustice, brutality, and adversity. The tone of his ballad changes from the serious-tragic attitude and through his ability to examine the characters and situations that reflect a section of black life.

Brown underscores the ongoing convention, ultimately the transformational potential held by the ballad. In this poem, the last ride allows the capability of modern black heroism and the efficiency of a heroic tradition in an antiheroic moment. The hangout nihilism that overtones the hero's critically true plan gives way, to a thoughtful romanticism, an involvement of the black masculinised hero and his personification of cultural determination.

Brown's poem appears to uphold the concept of economic deficiency, persistent racist representation, and hegemonic modernism's act of cultural malaise, all aggressive negations of African American agency and presence. With all these understanding, "Last Ride of Wild Bill," is a vitally important ballad. Brown takes the ballad, an essential medium of folk culture, and reconstructs it in a search for essential cultural strength.

The present article aims to explore "The Last Ride of Wild Bill" as a traditional ballad--how Brown introduces his hero in a signature poem that describes the symbolic parameters and establishes Bill's heroic act. Brown achieves this task in terms of form, theme, action, and final metaphor.

In this particular poem, Brown cites heroism and the omnipresent heroic spirit as the catalytic agents animating African American culture. Brown's cultural heroes --figures produced by the folk and embodying their essential strengths and aspirations --singularly confront the multiple forms of white authority and its stifling influences.

Both the folk ballad and Brown's literary ballad take up the figure of the folk hero, but where the folk ballad validates the hero's mythic stature, "Last Ride" seeks to examine the fundamental nature of heroism: how and why it exists, and what broader meaning it imports. Brown presents an extended address of the cultural hero, invoking the conventions of lies and toasts, but goes beyond the mere appreciation of folk idioms in order to examine the essential motivations behind the hero's perpetual rebelliousness.

If heroism is predicated upon the physical act of rebellion, so too are the various iconographic form which Brown's heroes take. "Last Ride", moving through various avatars of the heroic spirit, asserts the common yet often hidden heroic impulse anterior to the heroic act yet gesturing toward numerous possibilities. Thus, Brown's ballad seeks to locate power and potential implicit yet latent within the culture.

This gesture toward hidden potential fixes the hero in the broadest metaphoric spheres; here the hero is an ultimately transformational figure, one alluding to liberation through reformulation of self, community, and relations with white authority. The poem begins with an examination of the hero's power to transform confining surroundings, then embarks upon a linear progression in two modes, comic and tragic, toward ever expansive implications in transformation. Each specific face of the cultural hero reveals new possibilities, both individual and collective, culminating in Joe Meek's encompassing gesture toward the transcendent nature of heroism itself. Brown enriches the metaphoric development of heroism and its transformational potential with an intricate dialogue between comic and tragic modes.

"Last Ride" declares itself as a ballad in the traditional sense – "verse narratives that tell dramatic stories in conventionalized ways." The ballad narrates the last day in the life of a famously reliable numbers runner. In order to withhold his fame and stature, Wild Bill, the king of Atlanta's gambling world, must disobey the new efforts made by the police to end his charge. Brown substitutes the constant quatrain structure, and its regular tetrameter iambs with a new form that self-consciously calls attention to its own unconventionality. He used to construct the reader's set of expectations; in fact, he holds true to only the basic tenets of balladry, and then systematically violating them, thereby instituting the concept of transformation within the matrix of the poem.

Sterling A. Brown's poetic lines range from one word line with no stress to full pentameter varying different from three to five stresses. Though many lines consist of two or three stresses, the stresses themselves constantly move; so too, quasi conventional lines seldom succeed one another for more than two or three lines, again breaking a regularity that

is tenuous at best. For instance, “Challenge” begins the poem with a six-line stanza proclaiming volatility and flux as major organizing principles for the poem:

The new chief of police  
Banged his desk  
Called in the force, and swore  
That the number-running game was done  
And Wild Bill  
Would ride no more. (1-6)

Brown shows his range in length of line and his perpetually movable stresses in this stanza. He consistently reminds the regularity of such hard stops, alliteration, and occasional rhymes. These things strain to harness the indirect spirit of the poem, strain, effect, free verse, and thus a full departure from folk oral and musical traditions. He employs short lines, irregular stresses, and enjambment in order to nourish a sense of rapid movement, a kinetic tension indicating continual agitation and tumult.

Emerging from this sustained tension between regularity and irregularity, between conformity and freedom, the larger metaphoric implications of poetic form come into focus. His self-conscious refusal of regular expectations stresses the apparent and symbolic importance of transformation.

He breaks the conventions consistently, underscoring Wild Bill’s significance beyond the immediate poem. As motion and progression emerge from the matrix of the poem, they contribute directly to the effect of the narrative and the symbolism of the ride. Perhaps this symbolism goes so far as to suggest Brown’s own changeover powers in his revision of Western balladry in order to create a new conceptual space for black agency.

As the narrative structure begins to give itself over to metaphor, it invokes the progression of the ride –the physical movement across the city and the symbolic agitation against confinement. In both senses, the ride serves as a transformative act, with Wild Bill looming as the symbolic figure embodying potential in transformation. Indeed, his unconventional blend of several folk types itself reflects the disruptive and emancipating potential at the heart of the poem’s master metaphor. Vaguely reminiscent of the folk hero Railroad Bill, Wild Bill, on the one hand, reflects the basic qualities of the American and African American bad man or renegade. Solitary and in open defiance of law enforcement, the bad man “violates social conventions and spaces, virtually at will, and thereby represents not just black disdain for American oppression, but the ability to face hardship and win” (O’Meally 44).

Thus, by pursuing life beyond white circumscription, the black renegade represents an important set of symbolic possibilities: “The outlaw was in constant conflict and continually asserted his freedom from organized society. He was not only a man apart but a man above: above the statutory law, above the judicial process, and above the normal restrictions and expectations that fashion the lives of modern men and women. It was the solitariness and superiority that destined bad men, in the legends that were woven about them, to celebration and destruction” (Levine 471). Solitary, larger than life, and ultimately free, the black renegade finally invokes a space of psychic liberation that his community may vicariously experience through him.

On the other hand, Wild Bill exposes elements of the trickster, and so lays claim to an additional part of tools for redressing imposed limitations. In the African and African American traditions of animal and folk tales, the trickster uses guile wit to manipulate, often subdue, the physically superior opponent. Using the stories as both tools for instruction and means of inspiration, black slaves “revealed in their animal trickster tales that through wit

and trickery they could bring ‘trouble’ to the master in ways that constantly undermined their efforts to impose on them a value system that they had no reason to accept” (Roberts 43). In short, the African American trickster seeks to “improve his situation through careful deception” (Levine 127).

It is telling that Brown devotes a conspicuous large section of the poem to the reaction of the community, rather than focusing strictly on the dramatic events of the chase. Here the wit and humor with which the various communities respond to Wild Bill illustrate the effect and thus the symbolic possibility of Wild Bill as trickster:

These were the people  
That the bug had bit,  
Betting now  
On a sure-fire hit:  
Kiwanians, and Rotarians  
Daughters, Sons, Cousins  
Of Confederate Veterans,  
The Kleagle of the Ku Klux Klan,  
The Knights of the Pantry  
And Dames of the Pan,  
The aristocrats, the landed gentry,  
The cracker, and the jigaboo  
Hoi-polloi  
All seemed to think well  
Of their boy,  
Were eager to lay  
Their bucks on Bill.

### On Druid Hill

An old-stock cavalier tried to bet

His yard-boy part of his back-pay due

But Mose he believed in Wild Bill too. (109-129)

With much ironic humor, Brown allies groups that ordinarily would be diametrically opposed owing to class and racial divisions. White/ black, rich/ poor, powerful/ powerless, Wild Bill effectively dismantles these oppositions fundamental to the meaning of the community.

Brown completes this notion of liberating transformation through an apotheosis redefining a highly symbolic space. Although Wild Bill lands in hell, the final site and evidence of his transformational abilities, his hell is a reconstructed one that reverses the assumed values of temporal and permanent life:

The devils rushed at him

In a swarm,

And the cool

Wild Bill

Grew awful warm.

It looked like he'd

Broke up a meeting;

But this was the Convocation's

Greeting:

They climbed all over

His running board,

“Wild Bill, Wild Bill!”

Their shouting roared

And rang through all the streets of Hell:

“Give us the number,

Wild Bill,

Tell us

What fell!” (497-514)

Finally, Brown serves both formal and thematic unity through his central metaphor, “the Ride.” In practical terms, the idea refers to the narrative itself, both the episodic progression toward resolution and the revelation of formal transformation which the narrative progression exposes. It is the superlative romantic gesture toward freedom and autonomy, and as such, the ride signals the broadest symbolic movement from the palpability of the physical act itself to its expansive metaphoric implications. Furthermore, “Last Ride” establishes the expansive implications of the central idea, and by extension, those of the entire collection by laying claim to epic stature. As the embodiment of collective cultural aspirations and as one willing to battle forces threatening the community, Wild Bill serves as epic hero in folk form. From Wild Bill’s extended and detailed journey to his descent into the underworld, the poem takes on the trappings of high epic and thus a depth and breadth in metaphoric resonance. But even with its epic scope, “Last Ride” announces itself as a ballad in the traditional sense: “verse narratives that tell dramatic stories in conventionalized ways.”

## Works Cited

Brown, Sterling A. *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1987. Print.

Gabbin, Joanne V. *Building the Black Tradition*. Virginia: UP of Virginia, 1994. Print.

Sanders, Mark A. *Afro-Modernist Aesthetics and the Poetry of Sterling A. Brown*. Georgia: U of Georgia P, 1999. Print.